

# Street Gangs & Crime



## What is a Street Gang?

A street gang is a group of three or more persons, formally or informally organized, that have a common name or identifying sign or symbol and form an alliance for a common criminal purpose. These members individually or collectively engage in, or have engaged in patterns of criminal behaviour, creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community. These groups may constitute a criminal organization as defined in the criminal code of Canada.

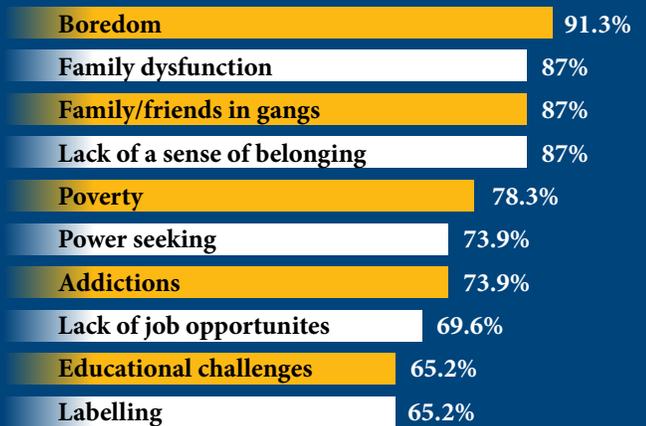
*A survey of Canadian police officers suggests that the majority of gang members are male (94%) and almost half are under the age of 18 (48%).*

Street gangs are most likely to commit crimes of assault, drug trafficking, or vandalism.

## How Many Gangs Exist?

There is an estimated 434 youth gangs in Canada, made up of more than 7,000 members. The highest number of youth gang members is found in Ontario, where more than 3,300 youth are suspected of engaging in gang activity. According to Waterloo Regional Police Services, there are currently 25 gangs in Waterloo Region with a combined membership of about 340 (Waterloo Region Record, July 2012).

## Why Do Youth Join Gangs?



A Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council survey of people who were at one time involved in a gang suggests that *boredom* is the number one reason youth first engage in gang activity.

Youth join gangs for a variety of reasons. Some seek excitement; others are looking for prestige, protection, a chance to make money or a sense of belonging (Public Safety Canada, 2007).



## Risk Factors

Risk factors are life events or experiences that are associated with an increase in problematic behaviours, such as drug use or gang activity, and can be divided into five categories:

### Individual characteristics

- Prior delinquency
- Illegal gun ownership
- Aggression
- Substance use

### Peer group

- A high commitment to delinquent peers
- Friends who use drugs
- Friends who are gang members

### School

- Poor grades
- Low educational aspirations
- Learning difficulties

### Family

- Broken homes
- Parental substance abuse
- Family members in a gang
- Extreme poverty

### Community

- High crime in the neighbourhood
- The presence of gangs in the neighbourhood
- Access to drugs in the neighbourhood
- High poverty

The most prevalent risk factors for youth gang involvement include:

- Limited attachment to community
- A mostly unmet need for belonging & recognition
- Poor parental supervision
- Over-reliance on anti-social peers
- Problematic alcohol & drug use
- Poor educational or employment opportunities or potential

Research suggests that youth are 2 to 4 times more likely to join gangs if they are affected by these factors. The more risk factors a youth faces, the more likely they are to join a gang.

*“Several studies indicate that risk factors associated with gang involvement are present long before a youth joins a gang.”*

(Public Safety Canada, 2007)

## Just the Facts

**FACT: Youth crime is not on the rise.**

The youth crime rate has been generally declining over the past decade. The 2010 youth crime rate fell 7% from the year before and was 11% lower than a decade ago (Statistics Canada, Police reported crime statistics in Canada, 2010).

**FACT: A small percentage of young people are responsible for a high percentage of criminal incidents.**

A Canadian study found that 16% of alleged young offenders who were classified as chronic offenders were responsible for 58% of all alleged criminal incidents (Public Safety Canada, 2007).

**FACT: One positive relationship with an adult can make a difference.**

According to the Department of Justice (2008), having positive relationships such as mentors, positive social environments through community and family, and having social and economic policies that support positive youth development will prevent many youth from becoming involved in gangs.



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